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by

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**(What Is Not Written on) *The Wall*: A Choreographic Exploration of  
Censorship and the Chinese Cultural Revolution**

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**(What Is Not Written on) *The Wall*: A Choreographic Exploration of  
Censorship and the Chinese Cultural Revolution**

**by**

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**Thesis**

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## **Abstract**

### **(The Writing not on) The Wall: A Choreographic Exploration of Censorship and the Chinese Cultural Revolution**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

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My primary research effort in this thesis relies on self-reflection and analysis of my MFA Thesis performance *The Wall*. I discuss the content of the piece for the manner in which it serves as a critical cultural intervention to the longstanding system of revision rather than preservation of Chinese cultural history particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. To conduct my research, I studied articles written by Chinese scholars and artists living outside of China discussing China's cultural history, reviews of performances of Chinese choreographers and companies from outside of China, books written about Chinese culture by Chinese and Chinese American authors living outside of China, as well as books by American authors about political dance such as Ann Cooper Albright's book, *Choreographing Difference: The Body in Identity in Contemporary Dance* (1997) and Susan Foster's *Choreographing History*. Throughout my research process, however, I have not uncovered many useful documents about Chinese art and

culture by scholars and artists residing in Mainland China regarding the censorship of discussion and art about the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Therefore my thesis focuses on tracing my creative process to develop my thesis performance work, *The Wall*, in accordance with Albright's deduction: "In the very act of performing, the dancing body splits itself to enact its own representation and simultaneously heals its own fissure in that enactment" (Albright 2010, p.186). The fissure, or fissures in this case, are between the individual, the community, and space between revision and preservation of history and tradition in China. *The Wall* is a commentary on Chinese history, Chinese cultural politics, and censorship intended for both Chinese and non-Chinese audiences, but performed outside of China by non-Chinese dancers.

Link to view video from tech rehearsal of *The Wall* on April 7-17, 2016:

<https://vimeo.com/165169502>

Link to view video from live performance of *Independence Day* on March 14, 2015:

<https://vimeo.com/146823051>

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## **Introduction**

Before I came to UT Austin for my Masters Degree in dance, I had been a professional dancer and choreographer for 17 years. In 2005, I formally joined the Beijing Dance LDTX (Lei Dong Tian Xia), one of the four major professional modern dance companies in Mainland China at that time.<sup>1</sup> We performed dance pieces in Mainland China, but most of the time, we performed abroad for different dance festivals and other art related events. I was always surprised that there were so many people who came to see our shows and were so interested in our work. In China, however, our work did not draw the same crowds even though some of the performances were free and inspired by Chinese culture. It made me introspective. Why did the Chinese people not come to see our shows? What would attract people to come to theatres? Will our theatres showing modern dance ever be full like those in the US or Europe? Most of these performances were in urban settings. The works we performed were heavily influenced by American modern dance and the works that were based on Chinese history were usually very abstract or dealing with narratives and subjects from ancient Chinese culture. We never performed works focused on China's cultural politics particularly, The Chinese Cultural Revolution (referenced as The Cultural Revolution later in this thesis), which was one of the most turbulent and influential periods of 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese history. Subsequently, I became interested in this aspect of Chinese culture. Even more, I

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<sup>1</sup> The other three companies: Guangdong Modern Dance Company, Beijing Modern Dance Company and Shanghai Jinxing Dance Theatre.

became curious about work that critically examined The Cultural Revolution and its relationship to contemporary Chinese dance culture.

I came to graduate school to try to develop a dance company here in the U.S. where I could have the freedom to critically explore dance works about Chinese cultural politics that would not be possible to create or perform in China due to strict government regulation and censorship.

In my second year of graduate study after presenting my work, *Independence Day*, (see appendix e.) I began to realize that I was interested in finding ways to create work for Chinese audiences that remind us of a part of our history that has been erased. As I started to think about my thesis, the following questions guided my research:

1. Is there an authentic Chinese form of modern dance?
2. Why do Chinese choreographers not make work about the Chinese Cultural Revolution?
3. What audiences see modern dance in China? Why?
4. How can I make work rooted in Chinese culture and history that is censored in China? Why is this important?

These questions led me to develop a thesis work entitled, *The Wall*. (see appendix f.)

Modern dance in Asia, and in China particularly, is still a relatively recent occurrence. Most westerners associate Chinese modern dance with Lin Hwai-Min who founded The Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan in 1973. This was the first modern dance group of its kind in Taiwan and Asia to receive global recognition. Later in the



1980's Willy Tsao created a modern dance company in Hong Kong called City Contemporary Dance, and then he co-founded Guandong Modern Dance Company in Mainland China in 1992 - the first modern dance company in China. In 2005, Tsao created Beijing Dance/LDTX, which is the company I was a member of. Modern dance in Asia, and particularly in China is most often characterized as fusions of modern dance with Asian folklore and aesthetics. These highly regarded companies and their founders brought modern dance to the attention of Asian communities and received much global attention. As I researched, however, I realized that many artists, scholars and historians neglected to interrogate or address the aspects of Chinese history that these companies have not addressed, particularly the impact of the Chinese Cultural Revolution on dance in China and the Chinese Diaspora (Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, etc.) and the omission and revision of history due to governmental censorship. This is not hard to understand. In 1966, Mao Zedong, the chairman of the Communist Party, started the social-political movement to enforce socialism and impose Maoist orthodoxy by removing capitalist and western cultural elements from society. That led to a decade of massive and widespread social upheavals that devastated China culturally and economically. Today, the Cultural Revolution is denounced as a "period of catastrophe" by Hu Yao-bang, the former General Secretary of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC). In China, public discussion of the Chinese Cultural Revolution is still prohibited by the government. As reporter, Xhingyu Chen wrote in her article "Gray Area: Book Banning and Censorship in China" for The Fair Observer online publication, "The country's leadership is well-known for restricting

free expression in the arts and literature openly and without reservations, not just in its modern incarnation, but throughout its long history. But it is in modern China that the struggle for free expression and open dialogue became a complicated game fraught with ambiguities.”

Almost 40 years after the Chinese Cultural Revolution ended, there are entire generations of Chinese people who are not aware of this dark period in 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese history and the loss of so much cultural knowledge. The lack of evidence concerning the impact of the Chinese Cultural Revolution on the evolution of modern dance in China raised many questions for me as a choreographer and graduate student: How ‘authentic’ can modern dance in China be if we erase such a significant historical moment in Chinese culture that in turn erased so much Chinese culture preceding it? As a result, my investigation analyzes the history and impact of cultural censorship in China from historic, performing and choreographic perspectives, examining issues of 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese history and social repression through a dance practice that fuses traditional and classical Chinese movement practices during and preceding the Cultural Revolution with western modern dance.

The research methodology I employed brought together China’s modern dance history with dance studies, and also incorporated archival research with performance ethnography and original choreography. For this investigation, I had to excavate, frame, animate, embody, and challenge my findings through studio and scholarly practice; I was able to combine scholarship and studio/movement exploration into a final choreographic creative process working with dancers, the majority of whom were not of Chinese

descent and all of whom had little to no knowledge of Chinese history or culture. My work involved an extensive review of literature about China written in the United States that looked into Chinese modern dance history, graduate course work in researching performance and performing research, archival research, discussions with artists based in China, and numerous field observations in China and attending performances of Chinese (and Taiwanese) dance companies in the U.S., as well as choreographic explorations in the dance studio to create a dance work.

Three years of academic and movement based research culminated in the creation of *The Wall*, a multimedia dance performance that explores the relationship between China's past and present through the aesthetics of calligraphy. By employing the aesthetics of black and white calligraphy I offer a way of examining what was lost, what was gained and what remained unchanged by the Cultural Revolution. Framed by a calligraphic aesthetic, the thesis puts into motion issues of power negotiation, equality, marginalization, censure, acceptance, rejection and thematic possibilities for Chinese modern dance in the future. The use of projected images on stage – Chinese calligraphy, scenic watercolors, propaganda photos inspired by the artwork of the Cultural Revolution, and graffiti projected on a screen throughout the dance -- help frame the time and place of the work and give a contextual sense of the state of the arts in China.

The discussions that follow outline the process of my research, which constantly shifted from the archival research to the dance studio. The first section contextualizes the historic content of my research and provides the framework for how I examine Chinese modern dance and its relationship to censorship that can be traced back to well before the

Chinese Cultural Revolution (however my thesis will deal with a point that in Chinese history to the present). I follow by making an outline showing the progression of how I write on the wall of China's history -- in other words, how I intertwined scholarship and movement-based research to produce a dance performance incorporating findings from texts and my own moving body.

## *The Wall*

I chose to title my thesis dance work *The Wall* as a reference to the complex history of The Great Wall of China as a symbolic monument that has helped contain Chinese culture and keep invading cultures out for centuries. Perhaps the most recognizable symbol of China and its long and vivid history, the Great Wall of China actually consists of numerous walls and fortifications, many running parallel to each other. Originally conceived by Emperor Qin Shi Huang (c. 259-210 B.C.) in the third century B.C. as a means of preventing incursions from barbarian nomads into the Chinese Empire, the wall is one of the most extensive construction projects ever completed. The best-known and best-preserved section of the Great Wall was built in the 14th through 17th centuries A.D., during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Though the Great Wall never effectively prevented invaders from entering China, it came to function more as a psychological barrier between Chinese civilization and the world, and remains a powerful symbol of the country's enduring strength. In an article in the May 2007 issue of National Geographic, reporter Paul Mooney states, "Attacks on the Great Wall are nothing new, from Han-dynasty battles with the Huns to damages sustained during the 1930s and '40s war with Japan. Some of the greatest destruction, however, has been fairly recent."

Mooney states that in the 1950s, for example, Chinese leader Mao Zedong exhorted the masses to "allow the past to serve the present." Farmers were mobilized to demolish parts of the wall and use the bricks for building houses, pigpens, and walls." Mooney goes on to quote Dong Yaohui, vice chairman of the Great Wall Society of

China who says, “The wall's biggest problem today, ... is the lack of understanding among the Chinese, whom he said don't realize the true significance of the Great Wall.... Outside of Beijing and [neighboring] Hebei province, the Great Wall is in very poor and backward areas. Trying to get the significance of the wall across to a people worried about their survival is not easy.”

I assert that this discussion of the troubles with preserving the Great Wall of China is in some ways like the challenges faced with preserving the cultural history of modern dance in China. To this day the climate for modern dance in China remains harsh. Funding is limited to state-sponsored companies, and at least one party official has to approve a production before it can be performed in public - and, unlike with ballet and folk dance, audiences for modern dance are small: the very concept of the art form is all but meaningless outside the major cities. Even in major cities there is very little freedom in what kind of modern dance Chinese artists can perform due to governmental control.

This led me to think about street art/graffiti- writing on walls. In a BBC article by Clarissa Sebag Montefiore titled, “Graffiti Tests The Limits of Free Expression in China”, she says “In America graffiti is often associated with poor, disintegrating neighborhoods and is viewed as a tool for the dispossessed to carve out an identity. In China, however, graffiti artists occupy an altogether different space. On the one hand the art is reserved for the emerging middle classes who can afford expensive cans of paint and pricey fines. On the other, graffiti artists are attempting to make Chinese cities – long defined by pervasive

politics and, more recently, commercial interests – their own.” (Montefiore, 2014) This movement is very similar to what I am attempting through choreography.

My thesis title, while referencing Chinese history, is also a strong metaphor illustrating how I reimagine and reexamine the meaning of tradition and cultural memory in contemporary China - is it preservation or is it revision?

## **A Brief History of Modern Dance in China**

It has been over 100 years since the first time the modern dance form was introduced to Mainland China by Yu Rong-ling (1882-1973), who was a daughter of an official in the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). (See appendix a.) Yu traveled abroad with her father, a Chinese ambassador to Japan in 1895. She learned ancient Japanese dances during her stay in Japan. Four years later, she accompanied her father to France where he was appointed as the ambassador. In Paris, she learned dances from Isadora Duncan, the “Mother of Modern Dance”, who was then performing and teaching in Paris. Three years later, Yu was invited to play roles in Duncan’s dance pieces. In 1903, Yu returned to China and began to introduce western dances to China. She began to perform in the royal court and was favored by Empress Dowager Cixi. In Yu’s later practices of western dances, she made her own creations. Around the time of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Yu was nominated as an art official in the State Council. However, she was also persecuted by Mao’s government during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Yu’s legs were then brutally broken by members of Mao’s Red Guard, and she was essentially bedridden until her death in 1973. (Liu Chong/Liang Weiya, China Daily)

Another early modern dance pioneer, Wu Xiaobang survived the Cultural Revolution, but he had to stop his study and exploration of modern dance at the time. Wu Xiao-bang was born in Taicang of Jiangsu province. (See appendix b.) He went to Japan three times to learn German expressionist modern dance from Masao Takada, Takaya



Eguchi, and Misako Miya. Wu returned to China in 1930 and opened the first Chinese theatrical dance school in Shanghai, then he establish Xiao-Bang Dance Institute to practice his own choreography. After his third time coming back to China from Japan, Wu thus started his life-long career and founded his own dance group called “New dance group.” As the “Father of China’s New Dance Art,” Wu created and was celebrated for many pieces inspired from The War of Resistance Against Japan (1937-1945), such as *March of the Volunteers*, *To Beat and Kill the Traitors*, *Broadsword Dance* and *The Song of the Guerrillas*. He also choreographed *Hungry Fire* and *The Ugly Flattery* during the Chinese Civil War. Meanwhile, Wu believed that dance education could correct the society. He taught and developed his own teaching style based on Rudolf Laban’s technique. After 1949 the People’s Republic of China was formed, Wu continued his creation and teaching in modern dance and established his own company, Tian-ma Dance Studio to practice his experimental works and develop his teaching style until the Cultural Revolution. He avoided persecution at the time because his works were all patriotic in theme. After The Cultural Revolution, he was the chairman of the China National Dance Artists Association and Founding Director of the Dance Research Institute. And he was the first instructor to receive a Master of Arts Degree in Mainland China. Wu’s contributions helped to develop new dance forms and teaching methods in Mainland China for many years. (From [www.Chinaculture.org](http://www.Chinaculture.org))

What is clear is that during the Cultural Revolution, all aspects of arts and culture were to promote the people’s revolution and aid the state. Anything outside these boundaries was met with severe consequences. Post-Mao, however, the situation became

less clear. Politically, China was trying to present itself as a more open society while containing unrest and challenges to its governmental authority. There are topics that are expressly forbidden – the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, the Tibetan struggle for freedom, the promotion of Falun Gong – but anything outside these precepts is a vast gray area. (Chen, “Gray Area: Book Banning and Censorship in China”)

For most of the 20th century, the political climate in China was not conducive to developing Chinese forms of modern dance. Instead, China built an infrastructure to support ballet, which was introduced by the Soviet Union, folk dance, and traditional opera. Essentially, modern dance was banned in China until the 1980’s, and it has only grown through the efforts of a few exceptional individuals, and the importing of western ideas. One early pioneer was Willy Tsao, a choreographer who had trained in the US. After setting up his own company in Hong Kong, Tsao helped to develop the first two modern dance companies on the communist mainland in the 1990s: one based in Guangdong, the other in Beijing. Another key figure was Jin Xing, who now has her own company based in Shanghai. Jin was not only one of the first of the post-Mao generation to go abroad and study modern dance, but this formerly male classical dancer was also one of the first Chinese to gain public acceptance as a transsexual, after undergoing surgery to become a woman.

With China’s reform and open-door policy in 1978, the cultural climate was gradually changed. In 1986, the first modern dance experimental class recruited 28 students and launched the training in Guangdong Dance School by support of Yang

Meiqi, the principal of Guangdong Dance School. The instructors were all from the United States through American Dance Festival committee. They were Sarah Stackhouse, Ruby Shang, Douglas Nielsen, Lynda Davis, and Lucas Hoving.

In 1992, the first professional modern dance company, Guangdong Modern Dance Company (GMDC) was formally established in Guangzhou under the help of Asian Culture Council and support of Department of Culture of Guangdong. Most of students in the first experimental class became the first generation of professional modern dancers in Mainland China. In past 24 years, GMDC has created many modern dance pieces and toured over 40 countries of the world, and has achieved a lot of reputation nationally and internationally. The artistic director is Willy Tsao, who also is the founder and artistic director of Hong Kong City Contemporary Dance Company.

In 1995, Beijing Modern Dance Company (BMDC) formed under Beijing Dance Drama and Opera by support of the Ministry of Culture of China. Jin Xing, the first dance student to earn the scholarship from The American Dance Festival to formally study modern dance in New York City in 1991, and he was also one of the first preparatory students in Guangdong. After returning to China, Jin Xing was invited to be the first artistic director of Beijing Modern Dance Company in 1995. Three years later, she resigned her job and move to Shanghai. Willy Tsao was became the artistic director of BMDC from 1999 to 2005. As similar to GMDC, BMDC attended many dance events all over the world, and developed extensive international influence.

Before the establishment of BMDC, another private dance studio, Life Dance Studio was quietly founded in Caochangdi of Beijing in 1994 by Wen Hui and Wu

Wen-guang. They collaborated with different categories of artists, and strived to use dance, drama, and visual arts to create multidisciplinary performances to tell the stories and experiences that related to contemporary real-life and the memory of history.

GMDC and BMDC were formed in the 1990s, and were backed by the Ministry of Culture of China. Both of them have experienced a very tough developmental process however in finances, personnel changes, and disputes over the past two decades, particularly in BMDC. Two former artistic directors' departure inadvertently led to the addition of two more modern dance companies in China. As I mentioned above, after leaving BMDC in 1998, Jin Xing moved to Shanghai, and formed Shanghai Jinxing Dance Theatre, which was China's first private full-time dance company in 1999. With the introduction of the new policy allowing individuals to establish private art organizations in Beijing in 2005, the second artistic director of BMDC Willy Tsao led most dancers and administrators from BMDC and quickly established another independent company Beijing Dance/LDTX (Lei Dong Tian Xia) in Beijing. I was one of the founding members, as a dancer and choreographer for Beijing Dance/LDTX from 2005-2009.

The new policy of 2005 also led more private modern dance companies to be founded in Beijing. Beijing Dance Theatre was one of the largest full-time companies founded in 2008 by Wang Yuanyuan, who gained her MFA in dance from California Institute of the Arts. Wang's works mainly use modern or contemporary dance forms to express the Chinese classical literature. The company has toured to many countries, and also has achieved a good reputation in the past 8 years. TAO Dance Theater (see

appendix d.) established by Tao Ye, who was one of the company members in both BMDC and Jin Xing Dance Theatre. In many ways, Tao has achieved great reputation in the Chinese modern dance field, although the company has been established for only 8 years. They have been invited to attend almost all of the most influential dance festivals worldwide, including the American Dance Festival, Edinburg Festival, Singapore Arts Festival, Fall for Dance Festival in New York and so on yet they still have difficulties in China. Many other dance groups are also very active touring globally, such as Beijing Nine Contemporary Dance Company (2010) and the Hou Ying Dance Theatre Beijing (2013). In other cities of Mainland China, more and more dance groups also rose rapidly. Wuzhou Modern Dance Company of Shanxi and Sichuan Modern Dance Company were established in two years. Some of these companies have found some success in China, mainly in the urban areas. But it is difficult for them to find funding. Like most artistic enterprise in China, excellence is still largely defined by governmental support. To be successful, artists must accept governmental regulations. The government only provides funding support to a few companies and makes finding private support difficult. Therefore artistic potential is hard to reach.

### **The Chinese Cultural Revolution: Cultural Disruption, Retention, and Evolution**

In light of the historical context previously discussed, I then ask this: In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, why can't Chinese artists create work that reflects their true experience in China? Must artists censor their work particularly if the work is inspired by sensitive periods in Chinese history? It is essential to understand 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Chinese culture's "unofficial" history in order to grasp why these questions are difficult to ask or to answer.

Much has been written about Mao Zedong who is considered the father of Communist China and the founder of The People's Republic of China. Mao was born December 26, 1893 into a peasant family in Shaoshan, in Hunan province, central China. After training as a teacher, he travelled to Beijing where he worked in the University Library. It was during this time that he began to read Marxist literature and to learn about communism. At this time, China was beginning to open itself to capitalism. In 1921, he became a founder member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and set up a branch in Hunan. In 1923, the Kuomintang (KMT) nationalist party led by Chiang Kai-shek had allied with the CCP to defeat the warlords who controlled much of northern China. Then in 1927, the KMT now led by Chiang Kai-shek launched an anti-communist purge.

But the Communists and KMT were again temporarily allied during eight years of war with Japan from 1937-1945, but shortly after the end of World War II, civil war

broke out in China. The Communists were victorious, and on October 1, 1949 Mao proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Chiang Kai-shek fled to the island of Taiwan.

Mao and his key collaborators called the “Gang of Four” that included his wife, Jiang Qing, set out to reshape Chinese society. Agriculture and industry came under state ownership and China's farmers were made into collectives. All opposition was ruthlessly suppressed. In 1958, in an attempt to introduce a more 'Chinese' form of communism, Mao launched the 'Great Leap Forward'. This aimed at mass mobilization of labor to improve agricultural and industrial production. The result, instead, was a massive decline in agricultural output, which, together with poor harvests, led to famine and the deaths of millions. The policy was abandoned and Mao's political power weakened when Chinese intellectuals began to resist him.

In an attempt to re-assert his authority, Mao launched the 'Cultural Revolution' in 1966, aiming to purge the country of “impure” elements and revive the revolutionary spirit. Mao ordered the closure of China's schools, and young intellectuals living in the cities were sent into the countryside to be "re-educated" through hard manual labor. The Cultural Revolution destroyed much of China's traditional cultural heritage as well as creating general economic and social chaos in the country. In September 1967, with many cities on the verge of anarchy, Mao sent in the army to restore order. One and a half million people died and much of the country's cultural heritage was destroyed.

After the start of the Cultural Revolution, all traditional forms of theatre and dance were prohibited. This included many famous Chinese traditional operas, dramas and dance that were centuries old. Much of this was led by Jiang Qing who interpreted Mao's teachings very rigidly. This led to a politicization of theatre and dance to heights never experienced in China. Jiang Qing created new aesthetics for theatre that were used to create what were known as Model Dramas, Operas and Ballets (also called *Yangbanxi*). One of the most famous was "Red Detachment of Women" which is still hugely popular in China. (see appendix c.) These model dramas, operas and ballets were similar to traditional ones in that they were based on characters. But these characters were based solely on their class backgrounds and there were mainly two categories- the revolutionary ("good") character and those who opposed the revolution- i.e. ("bad") class enemies. The good characters typically stand in the middle of the stage in heroic poses under pink or red light while the bad characters were placed on the sides of the stage in grotesque poses under dim blue light.

Although these model performances were designed to instill Maoist values of what it means to be Chinese, they often employed a mix of Chinese and western classical music. Jiang Qing was often quoted as saying western music was better suited to express heroism than Chinese music. Many other stage conventions associated with traditional Peking opera were retained as well as such acrobatics and martial arts although in fighting sequences traditional weapons were replaced with guns and rifles. Virtually no other works were allowed to be performed during this period between 1966-1976. And



Artists who refused to join the creative teams of the model performances were persecuted and often died. The Cultural Revolution brought China to the brink of cultural destruction. What is interesting, however, is that its destruction was brought about by weapons of culture such as Peking opera and calligraphy, a popular cultural form “which has enjoyed the longest in art and exerted great influence in the intellectual history of China.” (Da Zheng, “Chinese Calligraphy and The Cultural Revolution”, 1994)

In this same 1994 article, Da Zheng explains that the ancient art of calligraphy, the writing system commonly used in China and throughout Asia consists of intricate movements with a writing brush to create characters representing words and phrases. It is one of the oldest and most well appreciated art forms in China. All school children take calligraphy courses and practice daily. It is used to cultivate an esthetic appreciation of Chinese art and an understanding of Chinese culture. (Da Zheng, p.1) It is both a popular art form and an elite art form.

Zheng writes, “For thousands of years, calligraphy, while remaining a popular cultural form, has been mystified and became an extremely abstruse art.” She goes on to quote Wang Xizhi, the “Saint of Calligraphy” who says, “The calligrapher is an envoy of mystery, and the undereducated will never be able to master or comprehend it.” (Zheng, 1) By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with the invention of fountain pens and ballpoint pens, few people practiced the ancient art of calligraphy with writing brushes except for scholars and artists. Interestingly, Mao was a skilled calligrapher, particularly in a style

called 'Cursive Script', but with the rise of the Cultural Revolution, the classical tradition of calligraphy suffered. Traditional works of calligraphy were destroyed, torn apart and burned including ancient tablets and tombstones. From 1966-1969, there were no classical calligraphic works published (China Edition Library 281-82). However with the decline of classical calligraphy came the rise of writing with brushes to create what was called 'Big Character Posters' (called *Dazibao* in China). Mao created the first when he wrote "Bombing the Headquarters: My First Big Character Poster" in August of 1966. The slogan behind this act became famous: "Hold up the pen as a sword or gun..." Many more Maoist slogans were created and spread throughout China. Writing big character posters with a brush became a way to show participation in the Cultural Revolution Movement. It instilled amongst the followers because it was a way of taking something meant for the elite and showing they could master this as well. Art was emancipated. Everyone was now writing; it was counterrevolutionary if they did not. Even as Mao and the Red Guard destroyed the tradition they appeared to be showing their deep appreciation of Chinese art and tradition. Most people could not master "Cursive Script" and used more basic forms. This made Mao more distinguished. As traditional calligraphy was demystified, Mao's style and his writings became mystified. When he died people discovered however that Mao possessed hundreds of volumes of the old classical works. This was a surprise since Mao himself had burned so many ancient volumes during the Cultural Revolution. After his death it became a symbol of elite status to collect the dozens of big posters of poems and slogans in his style that were used in the model performances as backgrounds to spread his propaganda.

Mao impacted Chinese modern culture and history. Once he was dead and the current Chinese government was put into power much effort was put into erasing Mao's mistakes and influence to modern Chinese society. However, his model performances, poetry, and slogans continue to influence Chinese art aesthetically even today. Calligraphy became a powerful symbol of both "Old" China and "New" China. Zheng writes, "The traditional Confucian "elegance" was replaced by a revolutionary passion, and "etiquette" by a loyalty to Mao and his revolutionary line. In essence, the ideological function of calligraphy remained the same: consolidating the existent social order and system. People were given the right to write, but the revolutionary passion allowed in writing calligraphy was conditional: it should never transgress the limit prescribed. Any conspiratorial or bold activity, such as the dissonant voices expressed in the daring posters at Tian'anmen Square on April 5, 1976, or at the Democracy Wall in 1978, would immediately lead to the deprivation of this right." (15)

## **From Theory to Practice**

As I continued to research sources that would bring answers to the questions at the center of my MFA research, it was clear that I needed to take my research into the studio and to create work to explore my questions. In my second year of my MFA studies I went into the dance studio and began making a dance work that explored, choreographically, the model performances of the Cultural Revolution. This work was called *Independence Day*. I wanted to create a work in the style of the Model Opera to criticize the Cultural Revolution. The piece was described a brave and kind woman (the ‘good’ character) who had a newborn before the Cultural Revolution. When The Revolution started, the mother calls upon her neighbors (the ‘bad’ characters) to fight against the movement, but they support the Cultural Revolution and only want to protect themselves. Under the influence of the politics and others, the boy betrays his mother to joins the revolutionary ranks. The neighbors kill his mother. The boy sees the entire process of how his mother was killed by his colleagues. He finally realizes his mistakes, but it was too late. And finally his colleagues and he are all killed by the autocracy. His soul leaves his homeland seeking freedom and forgiveness.

Like the model operas of the Cultural Revolution, I used German classical music - *Faust: Overture* by Richard Wagner, and a movement of the Chinese opera and German expressionist dance similar to that brought to China by Wu Xiaobang. I had a cast of 10 undergraduate BFA dance students at the University of Texas at Austin. Of these 10 students only one was of Chinese descent and he was born in Malaysia. No one in the cast had knowledge of China or its culture. It was not easy to explain and translate my

research to the physical form. My initial choreographic process consisted of having a clear understanding of the time period and the events that took place during the development of these model performances. I looked at the contemporary practices of Chinese opera that I studied as a child. I reflected on stories my grandparents would tell me and radio shows I would hear as a child based on the model performances. I used that information as a tool to generate movement phrases that expressed my feelings and emotions about the content.

I generated movements and taught them to the dancers and then they improvised movements that captured their essence. Throughout the rehearsal process we had strong conversations about China's modern dance history and aesthetics. With *Independence Day*, it was my first time working with the young American students at the University of Texas at Austin and I was (and am) still mastering my ability to communicate my ideas in English. I suspected that I choreographed movements that were comfortable and familiar for me as a performer and did not really consider what it means to have non-Chinese bodies that are still learning to perform some of the complex ideas and movements that are a part of Chinese classical dance, hindering the process of bringing forward the true essence of the work. In that process, I became aware that my body was working with historical eras of movement, and these physical experiences were in direct dialogue with my personal experiences. It was hard to help the cast understand this.

Since my cast was younger in age, not Chinese, and less experienced in life, the process of getting them to embody some of the conventions used in classical Chinese dance forms presented many challenges. My goal was that they would bring their own

experiences into the work, but they could not relate to the use of facial gestures and theatre associated with Chinese opera in such a short period of time. I had to abandon some of the traditional symbols and narrative in order to make sure they looked strong in performance. The performance was well received, but one criticism was that it felt ‘old’ by western modern dance standards although it was very ‘new’ by Chinese standards because such a work could not be performed in China today.

In order to further develop *The Wall*, I understood that I needed to return again to China to dance and see dance there. I also better understood that I needed to apply the knowledge I was gaining in my graduate courses to develop a way to explain my ideas to young dancers not familiar with Chinese culture and history. I returned to China two times- in July, 2015 to go perform and see work in the Beijing Modern Dance Festival and in December, 2015 to research why no new works were made about The Cultural Revolution and to meet and talk with Willy Tsao, Ou Jianping, Zhao Liang and some of my old teachers. It was useful to return. In the summer, I was able to see what kind of work younger Chinese artists were making. They were trying to create work about being Chinese today. It is exciting to see, but I saw no work thinking about the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In December, I discovered that most information about the Cultural Revolution is forbidden and most of my teachers and even Willy Tsao were resistant to talk about it. They did not understand why I was pursuing this when I knew it was not a topic that would be allowed to be performed in China. Although these trips did not give me research for my written thesis, they gave me valuable information for my thesis

choreography. With these experiences in my mind, I discovered my true thesis work, *The Wall*.

## **Dancing *The Wall***

When I was in China for research and could not find any research on the Cultural Revolution, I noticed how no one talks about the Cultural Revolution out of fear of persecution. I started to notice how posters and signs throughout Beijing still used big poster style calligraphy. I saw more graffiti that also used these styles. I noticed that things are different but the same during the Cultural Revolution.

With *The Wall* I decided to continue to use elements of Model Ballet and combine them with the aesthetic features of black and white from Chinese Calligraphy to explore the relationship between past and present. I worked with a cast of eight undergraduate BFA students. Like the cast of *Independence Day*, none of the students were very familiar with Chinese culture or history.

This time I tried to apply what I was learning from Susan Foster in my graduate course with Dr. Rebecca Rossen. In Foster's book *Choreographing History*, she says, "A historian's body wants to inhabit these vanished bodies for specific reasons. It wants to know where it stands, how it came to stand there, what its options for moving may be. It wants those dead bodies to lend a hand at deciphering its own present predicament and in staging some future possibilities" (6). As a choreographer trying to convey that history, I had to envision my body and my cast's (non-Chinese) bodies within this turbulent history.

I chose to 'deconstruct' the structure and elements of model performances. For scenic design, I collaborated with Jon Hass, a graduate student in Integrated Media, to



create a cloth wall that the dancers could walk through. This wall represented knowledge and tradition. The piece is in two sections:

***Part I: Struggling Souls*** - These souls are all lonely, in pain, and struggling. They are those people who were killed during the ruthless movement the Cultural Revolution. They embodied both ‘the good’ and ‘the bad’ characters found in model performances. They were a group of people persecuted, but they were also selfish, numb, and cold. They didn't like support, but helped each other. They persecuted people who were different from them, but were also persecuted.

On the wall characters from Chinese calligraphy are written and erased and ‘ink and wash’ (watercolor) paintings of mountainsides are projected and fade into blackness. The movement of this section uses the motion of calligraphy and painting. Chinese calligraphy distinguishes itself from other cultural arts because it emphasizes motion and is charged with dynamic life. The piece aims to retrace the motion and dynamic movement through dance that is based on the different shapes and style of calligraphic text. Through the motion of calligraphy I show how tradition is used to repress as much as to free people’s minds. I use abstract wind and chimes to reinforce this idea of tradition even in hard times.

***Part II: Socialist Utopia*** - The dancers become the survivors of the massacres of the Cultural Revolution, they are passionate, aggressive, playful. They still represent both ‘the good’ and ‘the bad’ characters. Using rock music by “The Father of Chinese Rock”, Cui Jian, the dancers celebrate their survival. (I chose to use music by Cui Jian because his music was used as an anthem during the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989. When

the government cracked down on the protesters, Cui Jian and many rock musicians were forced into hiding.) The dancers recover from the suffering. A famous image of Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, appears on the wall. The image is covered over by graffiti of Chinese calligraphy (that start as slogans of Mao but turn into slogans about freedom). The dancers strip off their traditional clothing and yell, dance madly, play joyfully, and become drunk with freedom in their white underwear. They even dare to imitate and insult the leaders of China with the ridiculous movements and funny gestures. In their rebellion they become like zombies. The wall slowly rises up from the ground during this section. At the end it comes back down from the ceiling, they are enslaved again. This is the legacy of the Culture Revolution. In this section I use many Chinese traditional physical movements such as Taichi, Kungfu, and Chinese classical opera dance to reinforce the idea of tradition and how these once elite forms became available to everyone.

The process to create this piece with the dancers was highly educational. I found common ground with them by talking about finding their voices as young adults even when what they wanted to say was against what their elders believe. I used their movement backgrounds in contemporary dance styles to find an aesthetic that worked well on their bodies and could support the ideas of the work. I tried to apply another theory I learned in my graduate studies from Michel Foucault. Foucault used the body in his theories. Foucault believed that meaning and truth exist always within a specific historical context ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 1991, 46). In as much as genealogies and textual-graphic representations are technologies of evidence, they cannot replace the

primacy of the body, about which Foucault's view that "the body is the inscribed surface of events"<sup>2</sup> demonstrates how evidence (*or the absence of evidence*) is not necessarily physical thing but a circulation of power. In other words, it is the social, political, and cultural forces enacted upon and through the body that reveal truths about the human condition in general. It was this idea that helped me find ways to help the dancers find identification with the themes of my work.

*The Wall* was a very successful work that grabbed the attention of the audiences at The University of Texas. Although many did not understand the specific historical references, they could appreciate the distinct Chinese approach and the spirit of rebelliousness in the work.

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<sup>2</sup> See Michel Foucault's "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1991) in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*.

## Conclusion

The past three years of graduate study at the University of Texas at Austin produced many artistic, personal, and professional outcomes. The choreographic explorations I have had will shape the way I will continue to work as a dance artist. In my improved approach toward choreography, I have come to understand that I am an artist very committed to sharing my culture and my stories with people who do not have the opportunity to know about Chinese modern history or see modern Chinese dance.

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, a common insult in China is to call someone a farmer, a word equated with backwardness and ignorance. (Ian Johnson, 2014). It is this negative idea about being from rural areas that compels many to move to urban areas. I was born and grew up in a rural area of China and this is where my cultural roots are. The policy of Chinese urbanization not only expropriates the rural people's land, it also deprives them of their culture and spiritual life. As an artist and scholar who came from there, I feel that I have the responsibility to preserve and develop my home culture. I want to establish the dance company in my hometown, where is located in the southeast of Mainland China. I don't think that tradition and modernity are contradictory. I also see that progress in China requires we remember the Cultural Revolution for both its good and its bad. As Long Ying-tai said in her latest article *Between Zitenglu and Starbucks*, "modernity is a means for protecting tradition." (2016).

Many contemporary Chinese dance artists go to the rural areas for inspiration and material for their works. However, they mostly present their works in urban area. They create work to be appreciated by urban audiences and by non-Chinese audiences because

this is the best way to have their work supported. There are no theatres for the shows in the rural area. Driven by commercial interests, urban areas are the best places for promotion and selling tickets for covering the cost of the production and earning more money. My wish is to create a company that is based and performs in the rural areas of China and serves for rural people.

Inspired by the work of Lin Hwai-Min, the founder of Cloud Gate Theatre of Taiwan, I believe that art is a service and dedicative profession. For this reason, we should give our creation in dance back to the local people to nourish them and the next generations, as well as encouraging the rural residents to pay attention, preserve, develop and extend their own original cultures and arts through watching, participating, and sharing dance.

However the reality is that there are few dance companies that have financial support from domestic organizations and individuals in Mainland China. In a New York Times article titled, “Modern Dance Comes Into Its Own in China,” Alison Friedman, of Ping Pong Productions, which represents TAO Dance Theater, one of the more successful new Chinese dance companies’ cites “Some of the major issues facing modern dance: the dearth of resident dance companies; the prohibitive cost of renting performance space; the low rate of corporate donations to the arts; the inability of unregistered dance companies to apply for any government support; the emphasis on technique and rote learning in dance education; the influence of televised dance extravaganzas, to which much choreography is geared; the lack of celebrity dancers (the exception being Jin

Xing); and the absence of financing for dramaturgs and workshops.” (Melvin, New York Times, February 29, 2012)

Because all dance organizations belong to the state in China and have been fed and controlled by the central government for a long time, people have already formed the conventional awareness of the relationship between arts organization, the government, and audience. In 2005, the government finally allowed individuals to manage art organization individually, however, due to lack of financial support, plus the censorship of the government, most independent dance companies do not survive and have to seek the support from other countries. Some of the companies were successful such as Jin Xing Dance Theatre, Tao dance Theatre, Beijing Dance LDTX. The rest of the companies were barely surviving or collapsed. For my future dance company, the most important and difficult thing is the same as for them, which is how to attract and lobby local commercial institutions and individuals to sponsorship or partnership with my dance company both in China and abroad. As I discovered with *Independence Day*, many critics in the west have a hard time judging work like mine that is rooted in Chinese cultural history fairly: it seems both alien and derivative. To western eyes this kind of work can appear “a mish-mash of choreographic and ideological cliches.” (Mackrell, “Fresh, Fluid, Fun,” *The Guardian*, April 3 2008)

However, based on my experiences of the past three years, I believe more than ever that everybody has an equal right to appreciate, learn, and engage in the dance arts, not only those who live in cities or who can afford the highly-priced tickets. I believe that the audience for my work lives outside the cities in China. I believe that my work is a

valuable educational tool for those outside of China who want to learn about the history and traditions directly impacting 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century China. I feel that my work could be a model in China to provide awareness of how concert dance intersects with the history events, society background, and culture context. I am interested to explore how my research resonates, clashes, confronts, challenges, propels, supports or even expands Chinese modern dance and “invisible cultural heritage.” My goal is to breakdown “the wall” between China’s past and present, and between China and the world.

## Appendix a



*Yu Rongling, China's first ballerina, performs in Paris in 1902. She plays the part of Butterfly Girl in the "Rose and Butterfly."*

The photo appeared in the Chinese magazine, New Observation, in the 1950s. [China Daily]



## Appendix b



*An example of Wu Xiaobang, the Father of Chinese Modern Dance, in performance.  
Hungry Fire (1942)*

Choreographed by: Wu Xiaobang

<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/吴晓邦>

## Appendix c



*A historical image from one of the most famous model Ballets of the Cultural Revolution.  
The Red Detachment of Women*

Photo from: Richard King's *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-76*.

## Appendix d



*An example of one of the most popular contemporary dance companies in China*  
8 (August 2015)

By Tao Dance Theatre

[http://www.artsbird.com/NEWCMS/artsbird//en/en\\_17/enwtvc\\_17/endance\\_17/20150827/21355.html](http://www.artsbird.com/NEWCMS/artsbird//en/en_17/enwtvc_17/endance_17/20150827/21355.html)

## Appendix e



*Drawing on the aesthetic style of the Cultural Revolution this piece actually spoke against the Cultural Revolution.*

*Independence Day* (14 March, 2015)

Choreographer: Jun Shen

Photographer: Peart Laurence

## Appendix f



*One of the final moments of The Wall, the dancers who have all been brainwashed by the Cultural Revolution are trying to keep the wall of autocracy from coming down on them again as one lone dancer decides what she should do.*

*The Wall* (15 April, 2016)

Choreographer: Jun Shen

Photographer: Peart Laurence



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